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Language in the Common Core

Frank Daniello

One Cannot Live on Seeds Alone

The Common Core State Standards' (CCSS) mission is to prepare students for college and career readiness. These standards have been adopted by forty-six states and the District of Columbia. Metaphorically, if a student's education is an apple, then the Common Core Standards are the core. The core is the foundation of the apple, just as standards are the foundation of teaching. The core of an apple holds seeds that have the potential to sprout and grow. However, without the proper nurturing environment, the seeds are unable to become an apple tree, much as standards alone do not enact change. The standards show, in a general sense, what is to be learned at each grade level. In continuing our metaphor, teachers are the apple's pectin. Pectin is a carbohydrate molecule that functions to bind cells and provides structure. Apple over-ripening leading to rot is the chemical breakdown of pectin in cell walls. Similar to pectin in an apple, teachers in education provide the structure for teaching and learning. Teachers' expert knowledge, building upon the standards, structures pedagogy which fosters student learning. The absence of teachers possessing an in-depth understanding of content is similar to the absence of pectin in an apple: systemic breakdown occurs and brings rotten outcomes.

The standards "define what all students are expected to know and be able to do, not how teachers should teach" (CCSS, 2010, p. 6). This aspect is crucial, as it enables teachers to diversify their pedagogy to accurately meet the needs of students. In this article, I make the argument that on their own, the CCSS for English Language Arts (ELA) in language and writing at the elementary level (K-5) are inadequate for improving the teaching of language (written or oral) in schools. Standards cannot enact change and rather it is the application of these standards on which we should focus our efforts. Moreover, these standards indicate generally what is to be learned, but do not adequately capture the intricate skills and knowledge associated with how language use is influenced by contexts.

In the forthcoming sections, I present a brief review of the research regarding teachers' preparation for the teaching of language. Then I propose the use of systemic functional linguistics (SFL) as a means for developing teachers' awareness of linguistics as well as for teaching language with students. It is with this understanding, that the ELA CCSS would be most effectively met. Finally, I call for more school-university partnerships using SFL to support teachers' development of linguistics. This knowledge is required for making the language demands of schooling explicit to students, especially culturally and linguistically diverse pupils.

The State of Language Instruction: Rotten to the Core

Research shows that teachers need a well-developed knowledge of linguistics in order to effectively teach language (Fillmore & Snow, 2000). However, educator preparation is limited regarding the teaching of language (Patel-Stevens, 2008). Moreover, teachers lack the knowledge to make the language demands of schooling explicit to students (Schleppegrell, 2004). One national survey of first through third grade teachers (N = 178) indicated “of the 92% of teachers who had received certification through a teacher education program, 28% indicated that their preparation to teach writing was either very good or outstanding, 42% indicated that their preparation was adequate, and 28% indicated that it was poor or inadequate” (Cutler & Graham, 2008, p. 911). A second national survey of fourth and sixth grade teachers (N=103) showed about 65 percent of the teachers reported to have received minimal to no preparation to teach writing during their college coursework (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). I propose that much of this lack of comfort in teaching writing stems from limited understanding of language. The scholarship and research in the profession appears to indicate that teachers are not well enough prepared for the teaching language and writing.

Using Systemic Functional Linguistics to Grow Core Seeds

Systemic functional linguistics (SFL) is a sociocultural theory of the study of language (Halliday, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1989). This theory provides a lens to view language as functioning— making meaning in text. In SFL, language use is not interpreted from forms of words (morphology) and then from forms of sentence structures (syntax) to make meaning, like in traditional western linguistics. Instead, SFL approaches language analysis from the perspective of language as a “system of meanings, accompanied by forms through which meanings can be realized” (Halliday, 1994, p. xiv).

This theoretical lens to view language is an effective way for teachers to educate students. An SFL approach to teaching language is not prescriptive. “Rather it is concerned with providing information about the development of effective texts for particular purposes, and providing it at the point of need within the context of real, purposeful language use” (Derewianka, 1990, p. 5). In SFL-informed language instruction, text meanings are context specific. Realized meanings that come from texts, written or oral, exist in two contexts (Butt, Fay, Feez, Spinks, & Yasllop, 2000). These two contexts, one within the other, are a context of culture and a context of situation (Butt, et al., 2000). Both affect language use to make meaning.

Context of Culture

The context of culture influences how language is used to achieve social goals and purposes (Eggins, 1994) and also determines the way text is interpreted in its context of situation

(Halliday & Hasan, 1989). The way speakers or writers use language to achieve varying purposes differs across cultures, but follows a common framework within cultures (Eggins, 1994). SFL broadly defines culture and for example includes shared practices among members of countries and ethnic groups, institutions like schools, and associations (Droga & Humphrey, 2003).

Shared practices among members of a culture function to shape how language is used to achieve social goals. For example, Asian cultures do not overtly use persuasion in texts to lead the audience to the writer's position, but instead employ an inductive approach, which suspends the message until the end of the text (Hinkel, 2002). Arabic speaking cultures "argue by presentation, that is, by repeating arguments, paraphrasing them, and doubling them" (Connor, 2002, p. 500). Anglo-American cultures use overt persuasion throughout the text to influence the audience to embrace the writer's stance. These examples show how cultures use language differently to accomplish similar social purposes. This concept is particularly valuable for teachers educating English language learners (ELLs). Writing in the medium of English, these students must navigate the demands of non-native language and culture in order to produce meaning.

SFL identifies the internal organization of text as culturally constructed and contingent on purpose (Eggins, 1994). According to SFL, internal organizations or patterning of language emerge from how a culture uses language (Eggins, 1994; Halliday, 1994). This represents genre, which is a recurrent configuration of meaning that achieves a social purpose (Martin & Rose, 2008) and represents a "staged goal-oriented social process" (Rose & Martin, 2012, p.1). More simply, texts in a culture with similar social purposes share comparable organizations and parallel language features and are classified as belonging to the same genre. The ELA CCSS (K-5) focus on four genres: exposition, information/explanatory, fictional narrative, and personal recount. The varying social purposes of these genres are enacted through language that is contingent on the context of culture.

Context of Situation

The context of situation lies within the context of culture and affects language use. In this context, situational aspects influence linguistics (Butt et al., 2000; Eggins, 1994), but not all aspects of any situation have an effect on linguistics. For example, the weather or individuals' dress may not impact language.

Situational aspects that affect linguistics compose the register: field, tenor, and mode (Butt et al., 2000; Eggins, 1994; Halliday & Hasan, 1989). Field is what is spoken or written about (Butt et al., 2000). Tenor is the relationship between speaker or writer and audience. Mode is the form of text, such as written or oral. Field, tenor, and mode are enacted in texts through language.

Field

The field develops from units of meaning expressed in clauses. Most English clauses have a structure that is functionally explained through participant, process, and circumstance (Butt et al, 2000). For example, in the clause, The game starts at nine, the participant or unit of meaning about the event or subject is The game (see Table 1). The process or unit of meaning about the concept related to the event is starts. The circumstance or unit of meaning about the condition is at nine.

Teachers' knowledge of how field is made in a clause can support classroom language instruction. For example, the participant, process, and circumstance within a clause can be conceptualized to students as slots and "each of the possible 'slots' in the clause can be described in terms of its meaning potential and in terms of the structures which can realise that potential" (Butt et al., 2000, p. 77). This teaching strategy can develop a students' awareness of how language and specifically clauses are constructed to make meaning.

Tenor

The tenor is enacted in text through how writers present meaning to the audience (Butt et al., 2000). One way this interaction is developed comes from the type of clause (declarative, interrogative, imperative, exclamation) selected to express meaning (Droga & Humphrey, 2003).

Another way tenor emerges in text is through modality. Modality is the way the grammatical structures of text express "different degrees of probability, usuality, obligation or inclination" (Droga & Humphrey, 2003, p. 58). Modality is constructed by means of verbs, adverbials, adjectives, nouns, and other language features. For example, speakers or writers' verb selection (need, should, might) changes the degree of modality in the text (see example in Table 2).

Teachers' understanding of the tenor will enhance instruction. For instance, teachers' pedagogy can focus on types of clauses. Furthermore, teachers could educate students regarding the way clauses not only achieve field, but also affect the relationship between the speaker or the writer and audience. In addition, knowledge of this tenor informs teachers' instruction about how language use (e.g. verbs and adjectives) affects position or modality.

Mode

The mode relates to using language to organize the meanings (field and tenor) in a coherent manner within texts (Butt et al., 2000; Matthiessen, Teruya & Lam, 2010). Text cohesion is fostered from a variety of grammatical resources. They include paragraph

preview (topic sentences), nominalization, reference ties, ellipsis, lexical ties, and text connectives (see Droga & Humphrey, 2003). All grammatical resources are defined in a functional way (Halliday, 1985).

The grammatical resource theme and rheme is prevalent in SFL and function to develop meaning in clauses and enact text cohesion. Theme is “the element which serves as the point of departure of the message; it is that with which the clause is concerned” (Halliday, 1985, p. 38). The theme is developed by the rheme. For example, in the clause, The cat ran across the street to get away from the dog. The theme is The cat and is the focus of the clause. The rheme is ran across the street to get away from the dog and develops the meaning of the theme. Consequently, a clause to make meaning “consists of a Theme accompanied by a Rheme; and the structure is expressed by the order—whatever is chosen as the Theme is put first” (Halliday, 1985, p. 38).

Text cohesion is contingent on the appropriate element being selected as the theme in a clause. Thus, at the more micro-level, the flow of information in the text is controlled by the choice of theme...at the text level, the beginning of the clauses focus our attention on how the topic is being developed. This helps to make the text coherent and to enable the reader to predict how the text is unfolding. (Derewianka, 1998, p. 104)

For instance, in the clause, A dog plays with a boy (Table 3), the theme of the clause is A dog and the rheme is plays with a boy. In this clause the concern is A dog. However, the focus of the clause can be changed by restructuring the clause to A boy plays with a dog. In this newly formed clause, the theme becomes A boy and the rheme turns into plays with a dog. It is important to note that both clauses are syntactically correct, but the appropriate clause to use is contingent on the text’s purpose or concern and thus is the deciding factor for the writer in selecting which clause to implement.

Teachers’ comprehension of mode can inform language pedagogy. For instance, instruction focused on theme and rheme can develop students’ awareness of how text cohesion is achieved. This content is probably most appropriate with upper elementary grade students. When students lack comprehension of theme and rheme, their writing is often comprised of clauses that lead to inefficient progress with a topic. Most often, this is due to the text containing too many themes, which results in an underdeveloped topic and a text that is holistically difficult for a reader to comprehend (Butt et al., 2000). Teachers who explicitly instruct students on how language functions to develop text cohesion can enable students to construct texts that effectively develop a topic and are less problematic to read.

SFL: Rich Fertilizer for Seeds to Sprout into Robust Language Awareness

The advantages of using SFL to inform the teaching of language and writing stem from its focus on function and context. In SFL, knowledge of language is derived from its function—

how language is used to make meaning. The focus on meaning is different from structural approaches to grammar, which do not focus on meaning. Instead, structural grammars primarily focus on parceling the parts of speech (see Mellon, 1969; Searles, 1965) and do not emphasize the function of language. The ELA CCSS for the knowledge of language reads: “Apply knowledge of language to understand how language functions in different contexts, to make effective choices for meaning of style, and to comprehend more fully when reading or listening” (CCS, 2010, p. 25). Despite this overarching goal, without the proper instruction the content in the standards may still be taught in a manner that views language from a structural approach to grammar.

Language instruction should focus on the function of language, rather than just the knowledge of parts of speech. Instruction that does not focus on how language is used to make meaning is inadequate. Furthermore, this type of instruction can easily confuse students. This stems from the complexity of the English language. In English, the parts of speech can be modified through a conversion or a functional shift, “which permits a word to be transferred to almost any function the user wishes it to perform” (Searles, 1965, p. 3). For example, the words, green, yellow, and orange can be either used as nouns or adjectives. How these words are used determine their part of speech. Grammatical usage is contingent on the desired meaning expressed by the writer or speaker.

SFL does not gloss over form or syntax. Rather, “linguistic form is best viewed as functional in nature” (Painter, 1989, p. 20). According to SFL, grammatical structures are constructed through the process of meaning making. Thus, they are not dichotomized. In this way, SFL is unique from other grammars as “rather than form preceding function, the two are seen as mutually dependent” (Painter, 1989, p. 21).

The advantage of SFL is this functional approach to language. Writing becomes a cognitive process that involves linguistic decision making to effectively achieve a social purpose. Instruction that views the language process in this manner may more effectively support student learning of the written genres in the ELA CCSS. For example, since the grammatical system is functional, error of ‘form’ made by students (a different matter from mother-tongue dialect differences) can be seen as arising from problems in creating particular kinds of meaning in context. Since form is functional, the attention of teacher and pupil should be directed to what the language user is or should be trying to do, and how this be effectively achieved linguistically, rather than on mere ‘correction’ of forms. (Painter, 1989, p. 62)

Reasons for linguistic decisions are evident given the purpose and context for the writing. These reasons can be made transparent to students through instruction and engagement in authentic writing tasks. Another advantage to using SFL is that knowledge of language is acquired through involvement in authentic language-based activities, which are part of the CCSS, such as exposition or report writing. Other approaches to writing that embrace structural grammars often teach language through inauthentic language-based tasks, such

as sentence combining (see Mellon, 1969). Teachers cannot realistically expect children to develop their linguistic resources further unless they are engaged in tasks in which they achieve something by means of language. Our approach should not be based on attempts to ‘teach’ language items that have not arisen in any functional context for the learner, in the expectation that they will then be available to the child to use when an appropriate opportunity arise. (Painter, 1989, p. 62)

SFL has an advantage over other grammars as language is taught through authentic writing endeavors. Through these experiences, students receive language instruction from teachers, while applying their knowledge of language to achieve a specific purpose.

Teacher Professional Development: Cultivating the Soil for Seed Growth

As previously mentioned, the ELA CCSS serve as the foundation from which teachers build their language instruction. Teachers are agents of change, not standards. As a profession we must strive to provide more rich teacher professional development to aid in building upon these standards. Too often teachers receive insufficient development that lacks content depth and connection to classroom practices. According to Nieto, a Professor Emerita of Education at the University of Massachusetts-Amherst, “Probably the most significant action school districts can take in changing the nature of professional development is to provide meaningful and engaging programs that respect the intelligence and good will of teachers and help them grow in terms of knowledge, awareness, and practice” (Nieto, 2011, p. 126). I propose the formation of more school-university partnerships in education. These partnerships should embrace SFL and collaboratively work to improve educators’ linguistic knowledge in order to effectively implement the ELA CCSS.

School-university partnerships bring together teachers, administrators, and university faculty. Most often, school-based stakeholders have knowledge regarding educational practices and university-based stakeholders possess understanding of theory (Robinson & Darling-Hammond, 2005). An example of one partnership using SFL occurred in the Access to Critical Content and English Language Acquisition (ACCELA) alliance. This alliance was established in 2002. The ACCELA is a partnership between two urban school districts and the University of Massachusetts with a focus on professional development (Gebhard, Willett, Caicedo & Piedra, 2011). Teachers in this alliance attended courses at the university and worked collaboratively with university faculty, some of whom are leading scholars in SFL.

One case of a teacher using SFL-informed instruction in the ACCELA alliance is Wendy Seger, a fifth grade teacher, who used SFL-informed instruction to teach ELLs in her

classroom how to effectively use academic language in persuasive writing (Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007). Wendy applied SFL to language arts as a way to “unpack academic language” (p. 423). Her explicit instruction to students reviewed many aspects of academic language, such as lexical (e.g., modal verbs) and syntactic patterns (e.g., if/then syntactic structures). When reviewing these elements of academic language, students engaged in an authentic writing task. They wrote persuasive letters to their principal to convince him to reintroduce morning recess, which was suspended to make additional time for standardized test preparation. Analyses of final drafts of persuasive letters by Julia, an ELL in Wendy’s class, showed a heightened awareness of language (Gebhard, Harman, & Seger, 2007). This level of awareness was not present in Julia’s initial drafts. Her final letters displayed language indicative of a writer who makes linguistic choices based on an understanding of academic language, audience, and context. The texts also contain features of the persuasive genre that Wendy taught, and included: an opening statement, thesis, arguments, evaluation, and conclusion. This development led the researchers to conclude: In analyzing Julia’s texts, from her free-write to her final letter, we see a movement away from a sophisticated cartoon-like register to a more academic use of language. In these later drafts, Julia uses organizational structures, syntactic patterns, and word choices to convey urgency in a more diplomatic, yet authoritative tone. (p. 428)

This case suggests the viability of school-university partnerships and SFL-informed instruction in fostering ELLs’ understanding of academic language.

A second school-university partnership using SFL comprised of two urban elementary schools with high ELL populations and a university. The case study documents how Ms. Rallis, a kindergarten teacher in the partnership, taught fictional narrative using SFL-informed instruction over a course of three weeks (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2011). Ms. Rallis’ initial instruction focused on structural elements of the genre, and included orientation, complication, resolution, and ending. These elements were taught to students through reading and writing instruction by deconstructing mentor texts. When deconstructing mentor texts, students identified varying language features in texts. The deconstructing method was introduced to Ms. Rallis through professional development conducted by university stakeholders in the partnership. Ms. Rallis also modeled through her own writing.

Analyses of three bilingual students’ writing in Ms. Rallis’ class indicated that these students were highly influenced by the teacher’s writing. According to the researchers, “Students were perceptive and able to imitate what the teacher had done and to include the elements modeled and discussed...” (p. 121). Each student had varied degrees of success with the structural elements. However, across all students’ writing, it was deemed that “the close resemblance of the teacher’s modeled text appears to have influenced some of the cultural contextual features for students’ writing” (p. 123). These findings suggest that SFL-informed instruction benefited the language development of these bilingual students.

Educational scholars have provided five recommendations for teacher educators collaborating with teachers to use SFL (Brisk & Zisselsberger, 2011). The first recommendation is that professional development must provide SFL theory and a link to teachers' practice. The second recommendation is to remind teachers that genre "cannot be presented as a set of fixed rules" (p. 123). Context must always be considered as it affects language choices. The third recommendation is that teaching of genres and discussion of language in professional development should explicitly connect with all content areas. The fourth recommendation is to foster a "collegial attitude" among university and school stakeholders that promotes learning (p. 124). The last recommendation is to devote an extensive amount of time to SFL theory and its application to teaching. Ongoing teacher professional development, it appears, is required for successful use of SFL to inform instruction in the classroom.

A Perfect Apple Has a Solid Core and a Firm Structure (Pectin)

The ELA CCSS in language and writing can be beneficial for education. It is valuable only with investment in teacher professional development so as teachers are given the tools to be able to efficiently teach. If not, the standards will fall short of preparing students for college and career readiness. SFL can aid teachers in preparation for teaching these standards. Moreover, the theory provides the lens to examine language and develop teachers' linguistic knowledge required to effectively educate students about how context has an effect on language use. The ELA CCSS in language includes some aspects of how language is influenced by context. For example, a fourth grade language standard reads: "Differentiate between contexts that call for informal English (e.g., presenting ideas) and situations where inform discourse is appropriate (e.g., small-group discussion)" (CCSS, 2010, p. 29). Overall, however the standards do not adequately stress this connection between language and context especially in the standards for writing nor are teachers well enough prepared to explain this functionality.

In college and work, individuals must have the linguistic capacity to coherently, appropriately, and skillfully express meaning in prose for multiple purposes across various contexts: culture and situation. Teachers using SFL can foster their understanding of the linguistic demands of language. I advocate for this process to occur in school-university partnerships. Research indicates these collaborations using SFL have been effective at preparing teachers for the linguistic demands of teaching language and writing to students and particularly with culturally and linguistically diverse students. The benefit of these partnerships is that they bring together stakeholders (university faculty, teachers, administrators,) with knowledge of theory and practice. This combination fosters teachers' knowledge of linguistics that is valuable for classroom pedagogy. Teachers equipped with linguistic understanding and the ELA CCSS will ensure that many magnificent seeds grow into apples.

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